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SUBJECT: HAKIM OPTIMISTIC ABOUT 2008 IN MEETING WITH AMB

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a December 31 meeting with the Ambassador, ISCI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim agreed that significant security, economic, and political progress had been made in 2007. He expressed hope that provincial elections would be held in 2008 but was noncommittal over the possibility of using an open-list system. Hakim agreed that the Council of Representatives (COR) needed to take its responsibilities seriously, and expressed satisfaction with the improving capability of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). He discussed the improving relations between Iraq and its neighbors and emphasized the important role of the U.S. in supporting these relationships. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Hakim agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that the year 2007 ended on a more positive note than it began and cited progress on a range of issues. In terms of security, he mentioned the increasing ability of the ISF to stand on its own and its success in maintaining stability in Najaf and Karbala. Hakim noted that the provincial governorates are more active than the central ministries in terms of reconstruction and development and that overall the situation in the provinces is good. Politically, he said he spoke on December 30 with VP Hashimi and saw a good chance for the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) to return to government. Finally, Hakim said relations between Iraq and its neighbors had improved.

¶3. (C) Hakim expressed hope that provincial elections would be held in 2008. The Ambassador said he considered 2008 elections 'necessary' and asked whether the Provincial Powers law needed to be passed before elections were held. He mentioned a recent meeting in Babil in which four south-central governors all emphasized the importance of the legislation. Hakim explained that the only required legislation was the Election Law, and said the parties were currently negotiating on the text. The Ambassador emphasized that, from an outsider's perspective, the law should sanction open rather than closed lists, adding that the closed-list system was the source of many of Iraq's current problems, but it is up to Iraqis to decide how they select their leaders. Hakim was noncommittal, repeating only that the electoral system was one of several points under negotiation.

¶4. (C) Turning to the Council of Representatives (COR), the Ambassador mentioned the importance of passing the De-Ba'athification Law and the 2008 Federal Budget. He added that, in meetings with Speaker Mashhadani and Deputy Speaker Attiya, he had stressed that the COR should not take a winter recess after adjourning for several weeks for the hajj. Hakim agreed, and mentioned several sermons recently given by the marja'iyya urging the MPs to take their responsibilities seriously.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador said he agreed with Hakim's positive outlook on the ISF. He noted that although commentators focused on the impact of the U.S. 'surge' of 30,000

additional troops, during the same period the ISF increased its numbers by 100,000. Hakim cautioned that the ISF still needed more training and equipment but expressed optimism over the ISF's overall capability.

¶6. (C) On neighboring countries, Hakim emphasized the positive effects of Vice President Mehdi's visit to Syria and President Talabani's visit to Egypt. The Ambassador agreed on the positive effect of VP Mehdi's regional travel and Ammar al-Hakim's visit to Kuwait but noted the absence of any Arab ambassadors in Iraq, saying he hoped for reciprocal visits from Arab governments to Iraq in 2008. Hakim asked whether the U.S. was involved in Talabani's invitation to Iranian President Ahmadinejad to visit Iraq on January 15. The Ambassador replied that he had not "heard a word" about the visit. Hakim said the U.S. had a very important role in fostering good relations between Iraq and neighboring countries, and the Ambassador emphasized his readiness to assist in these efforts.

CROCKER